DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 291 347 IR 013 135

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TITLE Older People and Communication Technology.
PUB DATE Apr 87
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Washington, DC, April 20-24, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cable Television; Developed Nations; Foreign Countries; Interviews; *Older Adults; *Qualitative Research; Retirement; Social Environment; *Television Research; Television Surveys
IDENTIFIERS *West Germany

ABSTRACT

Interviews conducted with 31 older, retired adults in Dortmund, West Germany, concerning their use of cable television and its effect on their everyday lives are the focal point of this qualitative study. Also discussed is a quantitative study of a larger sample of German citizens over age 14 in the same geographic area before cable television was made available. That study, which will be repeated in the spring of 1988, considered differences between older and younger adults in their social integration, everyday activities, and use of and attitudes toward television. The qualitative interviews with older adults elicited information on the following topics: (1) reasons for application for cable television connection or reservations; (2) favorite programs and channels and the degree to which specific channels are known; (3) changes in daily routine since connection to cable television; (4) effects of television on interpersonal communication; and (5) use of other media, especially daily newspapers. The first, partial results of these interviews are described in a generalized fashion, but further evaluation of the transcript material is planned, including analysis of the data against the background of media-theoretical approaches. Five references are provided, three in German and two in English. (EW)

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ED291347

AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION
1987 ANNUAL MEETING

WASHINGTON, D.C., APRIL 20-24, 1987

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OLDER PEOPLE AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

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Two developments will fundamentally change the social life in the Federal Republic of Germany until the next millennium. An age restructuring of the entire population in favour of older people and the transition from an industrial to an information society which is at present beginning on a broad scale. Therefore the theme of the paper will be the following:

- to give a short overview about that what is going on the the field of communication technology and the elderly in the FRG.

- to present the conception of a longitudinal project in this field consisting of empirical research phases and educational interventions.

- to report the first empirical results about the specific forms of communication of the elderly with cable television.

1. Introduction

The project "Older People and New Media" at the University of Bremen is an integral part of a scientific accompaniment of the Cable Television Pilot Project Dortmund. It is sponsored by the Government of North Rhine Westfalia as part of the programme "Socially Acceptable Technology Structuring".

The project presented here consists of two Dimensions. Dimension ONE (reconstruction of social reality) will describe and explain the longitudinal effects of the Cable Television Pilot Project Dortmund on social, communicative and everyday relationships of older people. Dimension TWO (construction of alternative social reality) concerns the development and testing of materials to be used to activate people for media work. The central intention of this educational intervention is to make people competent to deal critically and constructively with the media (=critical-constructive media competence). In this article the first partial results of the investigation are reported. [1)]

2. The Cable Television Pilot Project Dortmund

2.1 Objectives, Programme, Characteristics

The Cable TV Pilot Project Dortmund differs from the other three TV pilot projects in the BRD in that it is part of the

public service TV system and together with "Kabelfunk Dortmund" offers a wide regional programme of special interest to Dortmund citizens. The original intention was not to feed private stations into the cable.

The Cable TV Pilot Project Dortmund and its scientific accompaniment are to contribute to deciding on the future use of broadband technique by gaining knowledge about possible uses and the effects which the use of this technology will have, among other things, on individuums, families and social life in general.

2.2 PROGRAMME STRUCTURE AND PROGRAMMES OFFERED IN DORTMUND

Besides "Local TV" and "Repetitions Channel", "Kabelfunk Dortmund" offers the following topical programmes on four additional channels: "Sports and Information", "Education", "Culture" and "Entertainment". There are also the "Open Channel", in which Dortmund citizens can broadcast films produced by themselves (for this purpose the Open Channel provides a specially equipped video studio and communication assistants) and "Cable Text". The "Family Channel" programme has been integrated into the "Local Channel" as from 01.01.198 and the latter now broadcasts a full programme from 09.00 hrs until after midnight, as compared with from 19.00 to 22.30 hrs before. The intention is to make the Local Channel more

competitive, above all with the commercial stations (CABLE AND SATELLITE 1987).

The public institutions' nationwide programmes (ARD, ZDF, 3SAT, ARD plus and ZDF Music Channel) and regional programmes (WDR, NDR, BR) can be received in Dortmund via cable. Private suppliers feed programmes of RTL plus and SAT1 into the cable in Dortmund.

The broadcasts of "Radio Dortmund" can also be received via cable. This radio programme is produced by "Kabelfunk Dortmund" and broadcast from 05.00 until 21.30 hrs. Here, too, local interest is the essential factor in programme planning. There is also an "Open Channel" for listeners.

3. RECONSTRUCTION OF SOCIAL REALITY

3.1 SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

The investigation comprises the following sections:

- Description of the way in which older people make use of the cable TV offer in Dortmund, against the background of their individual life-stories, experiences and expectations.
- Effects on everyday life, particularly primary communicati of the individual way in which cable TV is made use of.

3.2 SET-UP OF INVESTIGATION

Besides the dissemination of the results in workshops and seminars with researchers and older people, the Dimension "Reconstruction of Social Reality" consists of two parts:

Part A consists of standardised or so-called quantitative inquiries. The Zero Survey was carried out by the GfK (Society for Consumer Research, Nuremberg) in April/May 1985, i.e. before the Cable TV Pilot Project Dortmund was put into operation. Basic universe were Germans from the age of 14, living in private households in the area under research. In the spring of 1987 "infas"/Bonn set up and interviewed a panel of citizens in the project area (Panel 1). This panel will be interviewed again in the spring of 1988 (Panel 2).

Part B consists of qualitative interviews with older citizens who are connected to cable TV in the research area. In November 1986 problem-centered interviews (Witzel 1985) were carried out with these persons. In November 1987 the interviews with older people connected to cable TV will be repeated. Sampling parameter were persons older than 55 and definitely retired from working life. Persons who live with a partner and have never been working can also be covered by the sample survey if their partner is retired. Part B is supplementing and extending the first part.

4. RESULTS OF ZERO SURVEY

The Zero Survey describes the situation in the area of the Cable TV Pilot Project "before the cable". The sample (N = 1037) is representative for this area.

The results of the standardised interviews may be summarised as follows:

- general

The "group of older persons" differs in practically every aspect from younger persons living in the project area. At the same time it is remarkable that the "older persons" do not represent a homogeneous group but that in some instances there are considerable differences between the various age groups.

- Socialintegration and everyday activities

The indicators for the objective social integration - size of household, size of circle of friends and acquaintances, membership in clubs - show decreasing values with advancing age, on the other hand the indicators for a subjective experience of social integration - attachment to the district and the people in the street, a feeling of well-being in Dortmund - show increasing values.

Parallel to the decrease of the circle of friends and acquaintances in old age, the proportion of older people who

take part in sports and educational activities decreases. Participation in communicative activities and entertainment shifts from "often" to "occasionally" whereas a reversed tendency can be observed in the case of "personal activities".

- use of media

In the use of media, too, there is a difference between older and younger people. With advancing age TV-viewing increases, listening to the radio decreases, and with advancing age TV is mainly watched between 16.00 and 21.00 hrs.

Older people are more positive in their basic attitude towards TV than younger people but a linear tendency within the "group of older people" cannot be detected.

While relatively linear "connections" between age and social integration can be found, this is not the case in the use of media. It may only be said that on the whole older people differ from younger people and that especially with the transition from the fifth to the sixth decade of life, changes take place at a more rapid pace.

5. RESULTS OF PROBLEM-CENTERED INTERVIEWS

5.1 METHODICAL PROCEDURE

The problem-centered interviews were conducted by the interviewe

along a previously set-up guide line which was to function as an orientation frame. On the whole, the individual interview proceeded along the interviewees' trains of thought. This procedure makes it possible for the interviewer to take up, and possibly pursue, new aspects which were not contained in the guide line.

The interviews were to ascertain socio-statistical and life-story data and prove the assumption that social and local ties have a decisive influence on people's attitude towards the media. In addition the guide line contained the following aspects (extract):

- reasons for application for cable connection, or reservations
- favourite programmes and channels, degree to which channels are known
- change of daily routine
- effects on inter-personal communication
- use of other media, especially daily newspaper

The interviews were tape-recorded. Following the interviews observation records were made, in which the atmosphere of the conversation, non-verbal behaviour, housing situation and peculiarities were noted down. The tape-recorded interviews were fully transcribed; non-verbal expressions, as for instance laughter, were also recorded and pauses in the text indicated.

5.2 DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

Altogether 31 persons were interviewed. Because of bad sound quality of the tape-recording of two interviews and as one interviewee was still employed full-time, 28 interviews could be evaluated.

Apart from four interviewees who have been connected to cable TV for 6 months, all others have been able to receive TV programmes via cable for 9 to 13 months.

With three exceptions, all persons interviewed have lived in Dortmund for several decades - nearly half of them (13) have lived in this city from birth. Apart from five interviewees, all have lived in their present district for at least ten years.

Half the group of older people whose interviews were included in the evaluation are women, half are men. Of these 28 persons, 19 live with their marriage partners, three of these also with their children; 8 persons live on their own and one woman has her two grown-up sons still living in her household.

The average age of the women is 63.4 years, with a range of 52 to 79 years. Half of the women interviewed had been working and have been retired for 6 months to 15 years. The average age of the men is 64.6 years. Their age range is 50 to 83 years. They have been retired from one year to 18 years, half of them retired prematurely.

5.3 EVALUATION STAGES UP TO NOW

The first stage consisted in dividing the interviews into topical units, following the evaluation procedure of MAYRING (1985). In accordance with an evaluation scheme these units were assigned to the individual topics of the interview guide line. The respective units were then summarised, the choice of words corresponding as far as possible to the usage of the respective interviewees. The next stage was to reduce these summaries to short statements. These reductions, assigned to individual points of the investigation, were summarised by frequency counts and - if available - compared with corresponding data of other investigations.

5.4 SOME CENTRAL RESULTS

- reasons for application for connection to cable TV

One of the decisive reasons[2)] for the decision to apply for connection to cable TV was the wide selection of programmes made possible by cable TV. Another important reason was the better quality of reception (half of interviewees); two interviewees stated that they had applied for cable connection in order to forestall a possible future aerial failure. One third of the interviewees were strengthened in their decision to apply for cable connection by the prospect of receiving specific programmes (sports, local programmes). Two persons stated that their application was made because they were specially interested in the programmes of RTL plus and SAT1. Two persons were of the opinion that cable TV would

be introduced sooner or later anyway - and it made sense, therefore, to join in from the beginning. Several persons gave special individual reasons, as for instance saving money because cable TV would replace the borrowing of video films, or the fact that the transmissions of local sports events by cable TV would make a visit to the stadium unnecessary

- favourite programme

Light entertainment programmes, news and information programmes led the list of favourite programmes, as in the Zero Survey of the GfK. Among the entertainment programmes, feature films - especially old "Heimat" films (sentimental films in regional setting) - and short quiz programmes occupy the biggest part.

- favourite channels

"Normal" programmes, the "Local Channel" and the "Sports and Information Channel" of "Kabelfunk Dortmund" as well as "RLT plus" and "SAT1" were named as favourite channels; and private programme suppliers take first place with more than half of the interviewees.

-Local Channel

About half of the interviewees stated that they know the "Local Channel", about one third maintained to use the "Local Channel" often to occasionally. In several cases, broadcasting time was said to be the reason for using this channel so seldor

After 19.00 hrs the other programmes prove more attractive. The interviewees found the "Local Channel" interesting above all on account of the latest information on current events in Dortmund which it provides - "because one knows the city" - (comp. STRAKA 1986 as to the growing importance of "narrow casting"). The "relaxed" manner of presentation was also judged positively; on the other hand, this was qualified by stating that programme planning was not "as professional as with RLT plus and SAT1". Although on the whole the idea of setting up the "Local Channel" was judged positively - also by interviewees who did not yet know it - there was a certain amount of criticism. The technical quality for instance was found fault with, reports were found politically unbalanced and the programme selection not wide enough[3)].

- Open Channel

Hardly anyone of the persons interviewed had seen programmes on the "Open Channel". Some did not know it at all - thus a question of the interviewer regarding this channel was countered with the question "what is that?". Some thought this institution was a good idea but were disappointed that although the "Open Channel" was "widely advertised" information was hardly available.

- Change of daily routine

With few exceptions, all interviewees reported that their daily routine had not changed since they had been connected to cable TV. Upon further questioning, however, they stated

that " viewing time" had altered to the effect that TV was now watched at other times of the day too, and above all that the total viewing time had increased. A 67-year-old man says: "Of course, we watch TV more often than before. Formerly we usually did not switch on before 6 p.m. but now I sometimes watch already at 4 p.m." For a 55-year-old woman cable TV offers the possibility to fill in certain times of the day. "I can't always solve crossword puzzles, now can I. I watch in the afternoon when I am lying here, because my husband is asleep; I lie here, I watch, I try all the stations, I leave the set switched on - and while I watch I find something."

- Effects on inter-personal communication

Some interviewees have found that cable TV, respectively viewing as a whole, affects inter-personal communication. A 61-year-old man, for instance, who originally opposed his wife's applicatio states: "Formerly we almost always had visitors or we went visiting, played cards. That's finished now. Today we switch on TV." His wife had tried to convince him with the argument: "Let's do it,we have nothing else, we are alone anyway, the children have left home." In this case the substitution hypothesis would be applicable which describes viewing as a substitute for primary communication. (Reimann 1983)

A 57-year-old woman's reaction to the interviewer's hypothesis that TV would lead to a decrease of inter-personal conversation was: "Whatever is one to talk about every night?" On the other hand, a 72-year-old woman says that TV programmes lead to

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conversations: "Yes, that's often the case - it's what I find interesting that one can exchange views about the programmes". The guiding of topics of conversation by TV thus proves the "agenda setting" approach (comp. McCOMBS & SHAW 1972).

- Use of other media, especially daily newspaper

Almost all interviewees are subscribers to a daily paper. Most of them see the difference between this medium and TV in the fact that TV is more topical. A 55-year-old woman: "TV is more interesting than the paper - in the morning the paper is old hat, and the news anyway". As TV is more topical, the paper increasingly loses its function as a source of information but for many interviewees it has not been substituted by TV - they have become so used to it in the course of time that they are not willing to do without it. Some of them "cannot at all imagine" that the paper can be replaced by TV. For many, reading the paper is part of breakfast just as their cup of coffee. The statement of a 61-year-old man may serve as an example: "Because I must read the paper in the morning. Well, it's just the way it is. On Sundays I miss the paper already, because there is none".

The majority of interviewees look upon TV as being more truthful than the papers, it is regarded as "more objective" because - as stated by a 61-year-old man - "what is written and not seen is not necessarily the truth" but on TV "I really see how it is and hear how it is" (67-year-old woman).

In spite of TV's topicality and although its reporting is considered to be more objective the newspaper has the advantage of giving more detailed information. "The journalist who writes his article can, of course, deal more intensively with the subject and go deeper into it" (60-year-old woman). Nor is the fact that newspaper articles reflect the writer's opinion and do not give objective information felt to be a negative aspect. This is rather regarded as an advantage over TV - because "one can refresh what one has seen" and then it is interesting to see "how others judge it" (56-year-old man) - "in the paper, I am interested above all (...) in the commentary they give" (72-year-old woman). There are indications of a division of functions between TV and daily newspapers. There seems to be a tendency to regard TV as an "objective" source of information. BÜWER (1973), too, ascertained that TV is regarded as more truthful. The daily paper serves as a means of background information and helps to form an opinion. But TV and daily papers can also complement one another, as stated by a 79-year-old woman: "One substantiates the other".

6 - Outlook

This extract of results shows that the relationship of older people to the media, above all to the main medium TV - and here the Cable TV Pilot Project Dortmund -, is very complex and multidimensional. But the data material (= transcripts) has not yet been fully evaluated. The next stage will be to analyse the data against the background of media-theoretical

approaches. They constituted the basis for the interview guide line besides the intentions of the project and the objectives of the Cable TV Pilot Project Dortmund. In this connection, the concept of parasocial interaction will be taken into special consideration.

The results of these analyses and of the first panel survey which has just been carried out, in which questions of interest to us have been adopted, will be the basis for a second phase of investigation to be organised by us in Oktober/November 1987.

An additional result of this investigation is the fact that the Open Channel, for which Dortmund citizens sent in relatively few contributions, is little-known. This confirms the project team in its intention to pursue with vigour the gerontological and educational intervention in the form of activating media work. For this reason, two "video groups with older people" have been formed since March 1987 (one in an old people's home of the Workers'Welfare Association and one connected with the project "Between Working Life and Retirement We hope that the productions of these groups will not only be fed into the Open Channel but that other media, too, will report on them. These groups are thus to occupy a model and initial function for the formation of additional video groups

with older Dortmund citizens. The vision is of older people making TV programmes for older people and possibly comprehending all generations in doing so.

We shall report at the next meeting whether this is going to happen and also on further empirical results.

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1) This article is based on a more extensive interim report as per 31.03.87, which will be sent to those interested upon request.

2) Several persons named various reasons for their applications. This is not taken into consideration in this article because it is only a first survey.

3) This criticism should no longer be appropriate because the programme of the "Local Channel" was extended to a full programme on 01.01.1987.

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